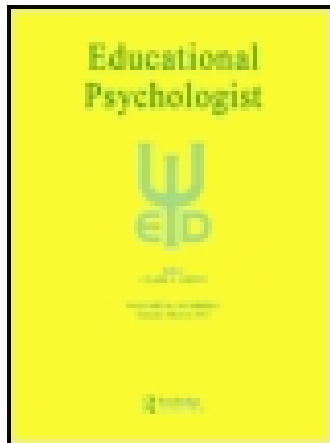


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Wisdom in the Wild

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Robert Sternberg's (2001) balance theory of wisdom accommodates important aspects of wisdom, and the educational intervention he is developing from the theory seems likely to yield a positive impact. One natural objection to the theory is that it does not predict wise solutions to particular problems. This objection seems misplaced; theories of mental capabilities do not generally predict particular solutions. Another concern argues that the balance theory and intervention focus on detached judgment, neglecting seeing past one's blind spots and acting wisely. This is a serious reservation, although certainly one that can be addressed.

Let us begin not with the theory but with the proposed educational enterprise. And let's go right to the bottom line. Will Robert Sternberg's program to teach wisdom succeed by the measure of whatever measures are used? Highly likely, given the track record of this researcher and colleagues like Elena Grigorenko. More important but less evident, will it do good? Will it make students better people, in particular, wiser people? In this reader's estimate, yes. Reasonably well-conceived and well-designed programs commonly do good, and I would expect this one to. Will the program sweep the world of education? Probably not. Hardly any educational programs do, even impressively validated ones, for complicated social, political, and economic reasons that regrettably have only a tenuous relation to the effectiveness of the programs. Still, people are working on the puzzle of spreading good practice, and it may get at least partly solved. In any case, I would be glad to have my grandchildren in the program Sternberg envisions. I believe that they would come out better people.

Framed by this basically positive reading of the prospects, my critical reflections focus on where wisdom needs to pay off—in “the Wild.” By the Wild I do not mean Amazonian jungles, but rather the messy practical enterprises of everyday life, along with not-so-everyday episodes of crisis, much in the same spirit that Hutchins (1996) wrote about cognition in the wild in the context of studying navy crews and their complex interactions, and in contrast with the tame (although sometimes cognitively challenging) world of classroom exercises and textbook problems.

Of course, the Wild is not just for the “real world”—it is part of the academic world also. The good thinking in any serious discipline like physics or history or indeed psychology ventures into its wild parts, whereas we fill up primary, secondary, and university education largely with its tame parts. But, however authentically wild academic enterprises can get, the problems of life are often even wilder. Whereas researchers studying algebraic topology or Mayan history get to choose how much to challenge their respective academic wildernesses, the accidents of life plop us down right in the middle of wild areas we would rather not encounter at all—anything from messy divorces or children with clinical problems to, on a larger scale, entrenched ethnic rivalries or global warming. Wisdom is called into service not merely for very ill-structured problems but highly unwelcome ones!

Sternberg is to be respected for tackling the problem of wisdom, because it is inherently a thing of the Wild, and the prospects of a good model of wisdom and an educational program to go with it are therefore especially challenging. Here, I will limit my comments to two problems that come from the Wild: the black box of judgment, where it seems to me that Sternberg offers a good answer, and the visceral side of wisdom, where it seems to me that more attention is needed.

PROBLEM OF THE WILD #1: THE BLACK BOX OF JUDGMENT

Good thinking and effective action in practical contexts call for discerning contextualized judgments. Although one can give heuristic counsel for discerning judgments, one cannot prescribe firm general rules. Imagine, for instance, trying to give firm rules for deciding whether a painting is “too busy”

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or an investment “too risky.” Accordingly, the contribution of discerning judgment becomes a kind of black box sitting in the middle of practical decision making.

This concern certainly applies to Sternberg’s account of wisdom. According to his model, reaching wise conclusions requires balancing a number of factors and considerations. Although heuristics are possible, firm rules are not. Finding the “right” or at least “right enough” balance requires discerning judgments to suit the occasion. Such discerning judgments thus occupy a black box in the center of this account of wisdom. One might even argue that there is a fundamental circularity: What we need for wise conclusions is a *wise* balance, but this of course begs the question about what wisdom is.

I outline this critique not to press it further but on the contrary to say that Sternberg anticipates it and answers it well. First of all, Sternberg’s (2001) account of wisdom gives a prominent role to tacit and explicit knowledge, which inform discerning judgments. So we are not completely bewildered about what the black box does: It taps the person’s reservoirs of tacit and explicit knowledge, which allow highly contextualized intuitions in areas of rich experience, in the spirit of “practical intelligence” (Sternberg & Wagner, 1986).

Also, Sternberg argues that his model of wisdom should not be held to standards that analogous and established models do not typically meet. To be illuminating and practically helpful, a psychological model that addresses a certain kind of problem solving need not specify just how particular problems are resolved. Thus, classic theories of intelligence do not specify the intelligent answers to typical problems on IQ tests, nor exactly how one would arrive at them. They operate at a higher level, characterizing the nature of that sort of intelligence in ways that illuminate broadly how it is that a person can be more or less well equipped to solve problems of that sort.

Sternberg also argues that his model should not be held to standards that centuries of human inquiry have failed to attain. There is no particular reason why an account of wisdom should provide algorithms to solve the problems of Jerusalem, any more than a theory of intelligence or creativity should provide algorithms to solve the mystery of dark matter, the missing 90% of the universe according to contemporary physics. It is quite enough that the model illuminates the character of wisdom in helpful ways.

If wisdom still seems slippery, it is worth recognizing what kind of a model Sternberg has and reinforcing how much it resembles models for other kinds of thinking. Broadly, Sternberg (2001) offers a combined descriptive and normative structural model of good practice: It aims to characterize what good practice in arriving at wise conclusions looks like, through concepts such as balance; intrapersonal, interpersonal, and extrapersonal interests; short, medium, and long term, and so on. And it also proposes that one can help people to reach wiser conclusions through instruction guided by this norm. Certainly one could argue philosophically about whether Sternberg’s characterization of wisdom adequately captures wisdom in the natural language sense.

But it certainly has a lot to do with wisdom, and represents an important area of human capability well worth developing.

Sternberg’s (2001) model of wisdom is very like models behind other efforts to teach thinking of other related sorts. Consider for example informal reasoning, the kind of reasoning we use to examine the truth of an advertising claim or a politician’s statement (Voss, Perkins, & Segal, 1991). People display many shortfalls in this sort of reasoning, for instance, rarely examining seriously the side of the case opposite their own. Models of good informal reasoning emphasize well-elaborated arguments, attention to the other side of the case, and so on. However, as with wisdom, the black box of discerning judgment sits in the middle of the process. Informal reasoning lacks the definitive structural tests of entailment that come with formal logic. The warrants for typical inferences characteristically are general rules of thumb, not universal rules. There are usually considerations on both sides of the case, which need to be weighed in the balance in much the same spirit that balance figures in wisdom. Reasoning about particular situations calls on tacit and explicit knowledge to inform the process.

Yet this hardly means that models of good reasoning practice are empty. Such models address documented shortfalls. They recommend shifts and broadening of attention that help people access their explicit and tacit knowledge more deeply to identify neglected considerations. Efforts to cultivate informal reasoning do not try to teach discerning judgment in the sense of giving strict rules, but inform and exercise judgment with a rich range of realistic problems and feedback. Thus discerning judgment gets developed through experience.

Essentially the same pattern applies to Sternberg’s (2001) vision of cultivating wisdom. The basic elements of this strategy are worth emphasizing:

1. Provide frameworks and guidelines to reorganize thinking in the appropriate direction. Improvements in thinking characteristically call not for exercising up existing cognitive processes that are too weak in some sense, but reorganizing existing processes into new patterns, typically with the help of guidelines or rules of thumb (Perkins, 1986, 1995).

2. Provide plenty of thoughtful practice with a range of realistic target problems. This not only helps to elaborate and stabilize the new organization but also helps to develop routes of access to tacit and explicit knowledge as well as to build new knowledge. An encouraging point here is that Sternberg does plan to use the right sorts of problems, problems that plainly involve the complexities of balance he discusses in the general model—for instance, the story of Felicia and Alexander, the long-term couple who find that one of them has been accepted for graduate school in France.

PROBLEM OF THE WILD #2: VISCERAL WISDOM

Another problem of the Wild has to do with seeing clearly and acting wisely despite oneself. In the world of friends, family,

and colleagues, as in the wider world of nations and global economies, wisdom is more than a matter for detached and enlightened armchair analysis toward a wise conclusion. We cannot count on appropriate decision and action even when the wisdom seems easy to come by. People persist in excessive smoking and drinking despite the proven hazards. People seek perverse revenge on others by harming themselves. People take risks that expose not only themselves but others to unnecessary danger, sometimes with grievous results.

In general, people fall into what might be called *folly*, which, for one way of defining it, is “recurrent foolishness that seems in principle within the intellectual reach of the person committing the folly to discern” (Perkins, in press). Recalling Sternberg’s (2001) plea that intelligence is not enough, certainly life teaches us that intelligence is not enough to evade folly. We all know very intelligent people who manage to defeat themselves in one or another of the games of life, either because they fail to see what is not all that obscure, or having seen it, they fail to follow insight with action.

This all-too-real feature of the Wild leads me to wonder whether the approach to wisdom described by Sternberg is too tame, too much an armchair version of wisdom, too much the sort of wisdom with which one advises others when one is not too involved, too much a cerebral and not enough a visceral version of wisdom. By “cerebral” I do not mean uncommitted or lacking in feeling, but rather largely free of stormy passions and impulses that can block insight and action.

Certainly stormy situations fall within the intent of Sternberg’s initiative, witness his concern with such characteristic adolescent problems as sex, drugs, and crime. And certainly there is a strong emphasis on cultivating appropriate values as well as broader perspectives. However, as I read Sternberg’s (2001) seven sources of differences that affect the balance process or his 16 principles for how to develop wisdom in the classroom, I do not find much about blind spots and problems of getting into action. Such characteristic quicksands of the Wild are not recognized or addressed.

A preemptive rebuttal to this puzzle might be, “Failing to see what should be obvious and failing to follow through are other kinds of problems; they aren’t problems of wisdom as such.” I am not so sure about that. Let me try to build an argument that the visceral wisdom of seeing past blind spots and getting yourself to do what you should is an aspect of wisdom.

First of all, turning to natural language, we speak of acting wisely as well as thinking wisely. Moreover, we can find wisdom behind at least some actions that do not appear to require remarkable insight, as in the following examples.

- It was wise of you to quit smoking. You have gotten away with it so far, but how long could that last?
- It was wise of you to make more time with your family. The kids are growing up fast, and if not now, when?
- It was wise of you to finish your thesis before taking that job. The job was tempting, but jobs come and go, and fin-

ishing this thesis between the cracks and away from the university would have taken a decade—if ever!

Recalling Sternberg’s (2001) balance conception of wisdom, it is clear why actions like those mentioned earlier might be taken to display wisdom: They all involve finding the right balance. The first balances the evidence of getting-away-with-it-so-far against the future prospects, the second balances time allocation between work and home life, and the third balances finishing one’s dissertation against a job opportunity.

However, the balancing act required by these cases is not especially subtle. What is wise about the three examples is not a matter of untangling a briar patch of competing factors, at least not as the examples are framed (they could of course be more vexed). Rather, it is more a matter of recognizing considerations that might easily get overlooked because of self-deception or suppression along these lines: “My parents both smoked and they both lived past 90”; “I *am* spending a lot of time with my kids, I’m home all weekend with them”; “Oh, I’ll just keep working on the thesis and it will get done eventually.” Also, it is a matter of taking the recognition to heart instead of just acknowledging it in a cerebral way, where mere cerebral acknowledgment might sound like this: “I know in principle the cigarettes get many people and might get me, but I really love to smoke”; “I know in principle I should spend more time with my kids, but things feel okay”; “I know in principle that most students would have trouble following through on a thesis in this kind of situation, but I feel confident.” In contrast, the problem from Sternberg of the long-term couple, one of whom had a graduate school opportunity in France, involves a tangle of complex pressures and tradeoffs, *in addition* to any blind spots and difficulties of following through on wise plans.

Seeing past blind spots and attaining a felt sense of the balance of priorities is a challenging enterprise with a distinctive character. It may have something to do with the kinds of mechanisms Damasio (1994) discussed, where a person’s emotional and body sense of matters provide crucial calibration in making good choices. It also relates to insights and skills about self-management (which would fall within the Intrapersonal category identified by Sternberg). Arguably, conventional notions of folk psychology such as will power, consciousness, and intentionality do more harm than good here, because they embody misconceptions about how choices of action get made (Perkins, in press). Psychological models of choice of behavior framed in terms of priming and expectancy seem to tell a more compelling theoretical story, and heuristics more consonant with such models—whether arrived at through knowledge of them or more likely through practical experience—are likely to serve self-management better (Gollwitzer, 1999; Kirsch & Lynn, 1999). In similar spirit, dispositional accounts of thinking foreground the importance both of detecting moments where particular sorts of thinking are called for, and of readiness to invest oneself in in-

tellectually and emotionally challenging problems (e.g., Baron, 1985; Perkins, Jay, & Tishman, 1993; Perkins, Tishman, Ritchhart, Donis, & Andrade, 2000; Stanovich, 1999). All of these perspectives take the visceral side of wisdom seriously.

To summarize, there are at least three general ways that problems that call for the balancing act of wisdom can be hard:

1. *Tangles*, where it is hard to untangle complex multidimensional tradeoffs and arrive at the right balance.
2. *Blind spots*, where it is hard to see past personal blindness and arrive at the right balance.
3. *Action gaps*, where it is hard to experience the balance in ways, and thereby manage your behavior in ways, that actually launch the actions recommended by your thinking.

Putting these three hazards on a list does not imply that they are independent. Unfortunately, they often occur together. Moreover, they often interact. For example, in situations where one chronically finds oneself unable to change, one's tacit knowledge may involve an unrecognized conflict. To search out the right balance, one cannot just think. One has to *act* in ways that at least cautiously test tacit assumptions, perhaps leading to their revision (Kegan & Lahey, 2001), which means acting somewhat contrary to one's current best guesses. In other words, to think well, you cannot always *just* think—you have to act practically in the world in ways that risk your thinking-so-far. Navigating such regions of the Wild fairly clearly is a job for wisdom. Whereas Sternberg's agenda appears to address mostly *tangles*, it seems to me that at least as many problems of the Wild are due to *blind spots* and *action gaps*, which make their own distinctive calls on the balancing act that wisdom involves.

To be sure, one could still argue that it is enough of a challenge to focus on the cerebral side of wisdom. But Robert Sternberg does not appear to be so departmental. He wants

practical impact across a range of academic and nonacademic realms. Which entails, I suggest, paying more attention to the visceral side of wisdom. Perhaps he already has. I just do not find this side of the agenda spelled out in the article. In any case, I am happy to see his program under way, curious to learn about further problems of the Wild that lurk in wait, and eager to track the significant progress I am confident that the endeavor will make.

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